

# Lost In Transgender

11/01/2014 by Chandra Thomas Whitfield



India Butler says, "I had to fight a long, hard battle to be who I am. I don't take no for an answer." (Photo by Jessica Studnick)



## A Closer Look At Denver's Embattled Gender-Variant Community

If India Butler's life were a TV movie, the Gloria Gaynor hit, "I Will Survive" would be a fitting soundtrack.

Pinpointing her "rock bottom" moment is difficult because her lows have been, well, really low. As a child Butler and her siblings lived with different family members and bounced around to different foster homes. She endured sexual abuse from a man considered a family friend. The abuse left her emotionally scarred and confused at a young age, especially when her grandmother reportedly found out and did nothing to stop it. Still she pressed down those feelings, determined to move forward in life.

Another low point was 17 years ago when she found herself jobless and selling her body on the streets of Canton, Ohio. Along with the **survival sex**, she also let local drug dealers use her apartment as a crash pad. "It was the only way I could get high for free," explains Butler, 47. "Doing drugs helped me cope with all of the painful feelings I had buried deep down inside of me ever since I was a child."

Then there was the time that she thought she'd found true love in a male companion. The romantic relationship seemed like a lifelong dream fulfilled until their money got alarmingly low in 2006. That's when he shared his "epiphany" that they should begin burglarizing homes and selling what they'd scored for cash. Butler wasn't crazy about the idea, but gripped with low self-esteem, self-doubt and the fear of being left alone to fend for herself once again, she says she begrudgingly agreed to serve as a "lookout" while he and another man broke into the homes. "I'd just sit on the porch, I'd never go in," she recalls.

It was a lucrative venture for a time, until the third partner got caught and snitched on her and her boyfriend. "And that was 'the straw that broke the camel's back,'" she says, matter-of-factly. "We got locked up." She ended up in prison for five and a half years, a stint that she says mirrored her pre-

prison existence – days and nights filled with isolation and fear, “What can I say, I’m a transgender black woman, it wasn’t easy,” she says of her time in the male prison, a hint of sadness in her voice. “I was stereotyped like I was just another one of the queens and fags running around in there. People wanted to jump me. I feared for my life every day. It was horrible.”

Even when it was time to be released on probation in 2012, she says her prison time was extended because her transgender status made it difficult for prison officials to find an appropriate halfway house for her. She ultimately ended up in a men’s residential drug and alcohol treatment facility in the **City Park** community on Denver’s east side.

## A Turning Point

While there, Butler was introduced to the **Gay, Lesbian, Bi-Sexual, Transgender Center of Colorado** (GLBT Center) in Denver. Butler says the support she received from a social worker at the treatment center, a woman whom she lovingly refers to as “Ms. Patty,” and a receptionist named Shawan Turner at the GLBT Center (also known as “The Center”), inspired her to turn her life around. With their support and Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous group sessions at The Center, she began her ongoing journey toward self-sufficiency, self-acceptance and self-love. Butler found a job and through a Coalition for the Homeless program eventually landed an apartment of her own.

Turner insists that witnessing her evolution from a man named John “Johnny” Priester to the woman now known as India Butler has been nothing short of amazing. “She is determined, goal-oriented and committed to whatever she sets out to do,” says Turner. “Her self-esteem has risen tremendously over the years. I always tell her, ‘you remind me of a rosebud; you’ve blossomed and opened up. You’ve become a beautiful flower.’”

Though still on parole for 20 more months, India is piecing her life back together slowly. She now works at a clothing store and lives with an ex-boyfriend in Greeley, Colorado, a bedroom community about 50 miles outside Denver.

Butler also participates in **TransAction**, a weekly support group for transgender women of color at **It Takes A Village**. ITAV provides an outlet for members to vent and share personal experiences while gaining access to HIV testing and information, medical resources, employment opportunities and affordable housing referrals. “We provide a safe space and treat everyone equally as human beings,” explains facilitator Nevaeh Anderson, a programs manager who also speaks to local organizations about trans issues.

Overall, Butler says she is grateful for her journey – bumps and all – but she openly wonders about the different direction her life could have taken if earlier in life she’d had TransAction, or crossed paths with a social worker or counselor who’d been sensitive, knowledgeable and educated about gender identity issues.

“I wouldn’t change a thing. I embrace who I am today and who I’ve become,” she says, with a smile. “I know God doesn’t look at all of the bad that I’ve done, he looks at my heart.”

## Bashing the Binary

While not as widely known outside of the field, thousands of social workers nationwide at government agencies, nonprofits and beyond are charged with providing critical, lifesaving work to transgender clients like Butler. The “T” in the well-known “LGBT” acronym, is ascribed to an individual whose gender identity or gender expression is different from the one he or she was assigned at birth. Some who identify as transgender prefer to be gender ambiguous.

“Some people are afraid of me because I don’t abide by any traditional gender roles or identity,” says transgender advocate Jason Rathsack, 37.

Breasts (brought on by hormone therapy) protrude from Jason’s form-fitting T-shirt and earrings dangle from both earlobes – a contrast to Jason’s Kangol cap and masculine first name. A self-described “gender nonconformist,” Rathsack has a master’s degree in social work and is a longtime pro-bono therapist at the **Gender Identity Center** of Colorado (GIC) in Denver, one of the oldest nonprofit centers in the country focused on providing “caring support for transgender people and their friends and families.”

“Some days I feel feminine and other days I’m in my male mode,” adds Rathsack, who has a preteen son from a previous marriage to a woman. “A lot of [trans] people think I’m just confused or in denial. Some still ask me, ‘So, when are you going to transition?’ I am transitioning, but my transition looks different than most others.”

## The “Authentic Life”

Butler can relate to the drama Rathsack’s gender non-conformity stirs up. She, like many other transgender people, says she knew at an early age she was “different.” She tried living as a gay man for a while, but eventually realized that she was meant to experience life as a woman. She hopes gender reassignment surgery is in her future, but for now she’s just pleased that just about everyone refers to her as “ma’am” when she goes about her day-to-day life. “They just see me as a woman: I love it!” adds Butler, of the people she comes across in Greeley, the same community that grabbed national headlines in 2008 as the site of the **gruesome murder** of a transgender woman named Angie Zapata. A Colorado man was convicted of first-degree murder and a bias-motivated crime and sentenced to life in prison for the killing. The verdict marked the **first time in the nation** that a state hate crime statute resulted in a conviction in a transgender person’s murder, according to the advocacy group Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation.

Butler says she feels safe there, though she acknowledges often getting stares and double takes. That may have more to do with the fact that Greeley is

not very diverse. As of the 2010 U.S. Census it was nearly 80 percent white. Butler, in contrast, is a feisty African-American woman, with meticulously manicured nails and long flowing braids that cascade down her back. She has an affinity for vibrantly colored attire and tends to punctuate her sentences with “honey,” like an old Southern lady (as in “Jay Z is a fine black man, honey!”). She, like many of her transgender comrades, has learned to live with the gawking and giggles that often come with living an “authentic life.”

Butler’s challenges with everything from housing, employment and substance abuse treatment to access to quality medical and mental health counseling (and even domestic violence intervention in previous relationships) are quite common within the transgender community, particularly among those of color. Although social workers are often charged with helping to address the myriad of complex problems they face, many – transgender advocates and experts contend – are often ill-equipped to handle their clients’ unique needs.

“Being ‘trans friendly’ doesn’t cut it; there’s a lot more that’s needed,” insists Courtney Gray, transgender programs manager at the GLBT Center. “For their services to be most effective, we need therapists, medical providers, counselors and social workers to be knowledgeable and educated about trans issues.”

Gray says her clients have reported having more positive interaction with “progressive-minded” and informed social workers in the metro Denver area, but experiences are not necessarily as positive in outlying rural areas where the social workers tend to be less educated on trans issues. Still, she and others local advocates agree that metro Denver overall offers a wealth of resources for trans men and women for a city of its size.

## Vulnerability

Along with The Center, ITAV and the GIC, there’s also the **Colorado Anti-Violence Program (CAVP)**, which has been around since 1986. Volunteers and staffers do everything from answer calls on a 24-hour violence support hotline and lead training and education work to providing counseling referrals and helping clients secure affordable housing and accessing quality, nondiscriminatory medical care.

Lynne Sprague, CAVP’s director of advocacy and co-executive director, asserts that that the need for support is so great for members of the transgender community because they are one of most vulnerable and embattled of all populations nationwide.

“Working with the transgender community is the epitome of what social work is and what social work is *supposed* to be about,” explains Sprague, a licensed clinical social worker (LCSW). “The greatest need is there and it is so rewarding when you see the work that you do make a difference.”

Statistics back up her point. A study conducted by the Transgender Law Center and the National Center for Lesbian Rights also reported rampant discrimination. Its study of transgender people in San Francisco found that:

- 64 percent made less than \$25,000 a year
- More than 40 percent did not have health insurance
- One in five did not have stable housing

National reports have also consistently noted the prevalence of LGBT people in the homeless population, as many are abandoned by their families when they come out as gay or trans to their families. The **LGBT Homeless Youth Provider Survey**, found more than 75 percent of responding agencies reported having worked with transgender youth. Besides being at greater risk for homelessness, LGBT youth in particular are more likely to become homeless at younger ages, are more likely to be infected with HIV than heterosexual homeless youth and are also more likely to be sexually assaulted on the streets and in shelters. LGBT men and women of all ages who do seek help, statistics show, tend to be less accepted in shelters, programs and foster homes. More than half of homeless transgender adults have reported being harassed by shelter staff.

Overall violence against transgender men and women remains a critical concern. The most recent violence report released by the **National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (NCAVP)**, found that rates of anti-LGBTQ violence remained consistent in 2013 with 2,001 total incidents reported, with a substantial increase in the severity of violence reported.

The risk for homicide was highest among:

- Transgender women
- People of color
- Gay men

The most severe violence was reported by:

- Transgender women
- Undocumented people
- Transgender people
- People of color
- Gay men

Drawing from data collected from 14 anti-violence programs in Colorado and 12 other states across the country and Puerto Rico, the report “**Hate Violence Against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and HIV-Affected Communities in the United States in 2013**,” is considered the most comprehensive report on such violence in the country. It also concluded that in 2013 fewer survivors reported hate violence to the police, and those who did report were often met with increased police hostility.

“Trans-women of color face a disproportionate amount of health and social disparities, especially African-Americans,” adds Anderson, of ITAV. “We

really have to fight for survival. We're more likely to be unemployed or underemployed due to being transsexual and the color of our skin. We are also more susceptible to drug abuse, HIV, hate crimes and even being victims of murder. As trans women of color, we're in survival mode every day."

Anderson says her personal experiences with family rejection, discriminatory job termination, low self-esteem and depression led to a suicide attempt in 2010, another pressing concern in the transgender community.

"The suicide rate for the transgender population is elevated – about 40 percent – compared to 1.8 for the general population; clearly there's a huge need for early intervention," contends Jane Davidson, a professor in the University of Denver's (DU) School of Social Work and volunteer therapist at GIC.

## A Social Worker's Mecca

GIC Executive Director Karen Scarpella and Sprague of CAVP, both LCSWs, say the alarming transgender statistics reveal the great need for more graduate and undergraduate social work programs to train students and those already working as professionals about how to best address the unique needs of trans clients.

"A long time ago, in social work your specialties were child welfare, substance abuse, eating disorders and working with the aging: That's it. No one was talking about transsexuals," remembers Scarpella. "None of my professors ever mentioned trans-sexuality in class; it just wasn't something that was talked about. In recent years it's gotten better to some degree, but there's still a lot more that could be done."

Scarpella's induction into the transgender world began in the late 90s while she was wrapping up her master's degree at Temple University in Philadelphia; she worked briefly as a counselor at an LGBT youth center. "A kid came in one day and asked me, 'Am I really gay or am I really a woman?'" she recalls, admitting that the question caught her off-guard. "I just smiled back and said, 'Tell me more about that.'"

The unexpected question inspired Scarpella to research more about gender identity. What she learned, she found to be "absolutely fascinating." Once she relocated to Colorado to begin her social work Ph.D. program at DU, an Internet search led her to the GIC. Within two weeks she was signed up as a volunteer.

"It was pretty clear that none of my professors knew as much as I knew about [the transgender community]," she recalls. "There weren't many resources available back then, I learned everything directly from the transgender people that I met here. They taught me everything I knew."

From 1998 to 2010 she did everything at the GIC from stuffing envelopes and leading group support sessions to eventually developing programs. She was named executive director in 2010.

"I've done it all here; this is a social work Mecca," she says, emphatically. "We also provide educational supervision for social work and counseling students. We give them an opportunity to take on projects here and to lead group sessions. The interns also see individuals, couples and families for counseling. Our goal is to teach them *and* provide a service for the transgender community."

## A Safe Space

With Scarpella at the helm, the GIC has evolved from a part-time operation that exclusively hosted transgender support groups a few times a week, to a full-service outlet that provides clients with low-cost and pro-bono counseling (in-person and via Skype for those in outlying areas), support groups, suicide intervention initiatives, employment support, housing referrals and even image consulting.

"We've emerged as one of the premier training centers in the country," notes Scarpella. "Even though a lot of the focus is on the counseling, I think the most important thing we've done is created an open-door policy. We're here seven days a week. Our clients know that they can come here just to grab a snack or hang out and just feel welcomed in a safe, homey environment. Last year we were open on Christmas Day and there were more than 20 people here."

Jessica Studnick/For Lifelines

Client Sarah Marie calls the GIC "a life-saver."

"It's the most important place in my life right now," she says, noting that the GIC's staff has helped her cope with the death of her wife, Tracy, whom she married before living as a woman. She's also leaned on the staff and volunteers for support with her ongoing battle of self-acceptance and for the preparation underway for her impending gender reassignment surgery scheduled for February 2015. "The GIC is the reason that I am still alive, especially on blue days."

Marie, 64, says a slow and steady pattern of self-destruction led her to the GIC about two years ago. "One day I found myself in the garage [of my home] with the door up and the rope was in my hand," she recalls of the near suicide attempt, tears welling in her eyes. That's what happens when you end up without support."

Courtney Gray says The Center, the largest LGBT community center in the Rocky Mountain region, provides similar support. Located in a funky industrial space in the heart of Denver's Capitol Hill community, a large rainbow flag, prominently displayed alongside an equally sized American flag,

greet guests upon entry.

Gray, a former mechanic and welder turned LGBT advocate, has served in her current role there for just more than two years. It was her need for support during her own gender transition that led her to begin volunteering at The Center six years ago. Gray says she immediately noticed a need for more transgender programming, so in 2010 she launched a program. Two years ago she was hired on full time.

"We don't do individual case management, but we help out in a lot of ways," says Gray, adding that The Center has two social workers on staff and also operates a youth program known as Rainbow Alley. "A lot of what we do is mental health; we refer out to homeless shelters that we know to be trans friendly. We also do a trans job fair twice a year where we connect them with 'trans friendly' employers."

It's been a productive few years for Gray, a mother to a teenage daughter who is still legally married to the woman she wed before completing her transition. She's spearheaded a **transgender behavioral health survey** that yielded 507 responses. "They thought we would not get more than 50 respondents," she says of the initiative that included partnerships with the University of Colorado School of Medicine, the One Colorado nonprofit and the Colorado Department of Health and Environment.

Gray is also credited with working with the Denver Sheriff's Department on writing its groundbreaking transgender inmate policy, which has served as a model policy for prisons nationwide.

"In most prisons no matter how you present, you're going to be housed in the prison strictly based on your genitalia," she says. "And you can only imagine how problematic that is for someone who presents like me. Our policy has paved the way for [transgender inmates] to now be housed by their gender identity, not by what's in their pants!"

Much of the language used in the inmate policy was also incorporated into a similar policy now used by the Harris County Sheriff's Department in Houston. The Center's policy is also currently available for reference on both the National Institute of Corrections and Department of Justice websites.

While the GIC and The Center are more umbrella organizations, CAVP, led in part by Sprague, is focused on "eliminating violence within and against" those in Colorado's LGBT communities, including domestic abuse, assault, harassment, homicide or hate crimes. CAVP leaders are passionate about their efforts to do so on a "community-based level" with little to no "reliance on police and prisons." Along with direct support for victims of violence, CAVP also operates a youth program and provides training for community organizations, victim advocates, shelter staff, healthcare workers, school staff and other service providers who work with survivors of violence.

"There's a crisis among transgender women of color. They're being murdered at alarming rates; there were five in the U.S. in June and July [of 2014] alone," says Sprague, who in September spent time in Colorado Springs, Colorado, attending a murder trial related to an attack on a transgender client. "Social workers need to pay attention to that. They need to see their role in helping address these problems."

## Passing on the Knowledge

Sprague says her work at a domestic violence program in Boulder led her to the LGBT antiviolence field.

"I will admit (working with the transgender community) was not initially on my radar; I was doing more mainstream anti-violence work when I started volunteering at CAVP nine years ago," adds Sprague, who teaches the "Power, Privilege and Oppression" course to social work students at the University of Denver that covers some transgender issues.

She took on a full-time staffer position in January.

Though discouraging, alarming statistics like those outlined in the NCAVP report, along with the highly-publicized beating death of a trans woman named **Islan Nettles** near a New York Police Department precinct in Harlem and the violent attack **caught on video** of two trans women on public transportation in Atlanta, propel Anderson of It Takes A Village to press on with her work.

"We talk about everything from domestic violence and safe sex to mental health," she says, of the two support groups that she leads for both trans and non trans women. "We talk about what we go through in relationships. The goal is for us to come together to focus on the many things we all have in common. The reality is that what we all go through as African American women is one in the same. We sleep with the same [type] of men and deal with many of the same issues like sexual exploitation and misogyny, all within the societal structure."

Continues Anderson: "The fact of the matter is that even as a trans woman, people in society see my skin color before they know anything else about me."



Sarah Marie gets emotional as she holds up photos of her beloved wife, Tracy, who died of Lupus during Sarah Marie's gender transition.

ITAV also provides referrals for hormone therapy and individual and life coaching for transition issues. Though the facility does not currently employ any social workers, Anderson says she often feels like one, as she assists many clients with necessities such as housing, clothing and food. Her overall objective, contends Anderson, is to educate and empower the trans community.

“I want people to know that when we live our day-to-day lives, we’re not thinking about anything but living our truth,” says Anderson, who has the word “revolutionary” tattooed on her right forearm. “What we do here at It Takes A Village is so very needed, because it’s so hard waking up every day knowing that none of our lives are valuable in this country. It’s kind of impossible for us to live the American dream, when certain people don’t believe that we should have the right to live the American dream.”

Inspirational stories like India Butler’s journey from prison to sobriety, insists Anderson, motivate her every day. Butler says she too is committed to raising awareness. She’s currently pursuing an associate’s degree in human services at Aims Community College in Greeley. She ultimately plans to pursue a bachelor’s degree in either counseling or, perhaps even social work, with an emphasis on helping the transgender community. Her biggest dream though, is to some day start a nonprofit aimed at educating and inspiring trans people to live their best lives.

“For a long time I didn’t think I could do anything with my life because I was trans, so I coped with drugs and alcohol and it impacted my life negatively,” she says. “A lot of us are confused and suffer from low self-esteem. We need help. I want to work with trans women coming out of prison to help them discover who they really are. It took me this long to figure it out for myself, now I want to pass on that knowledge.”

